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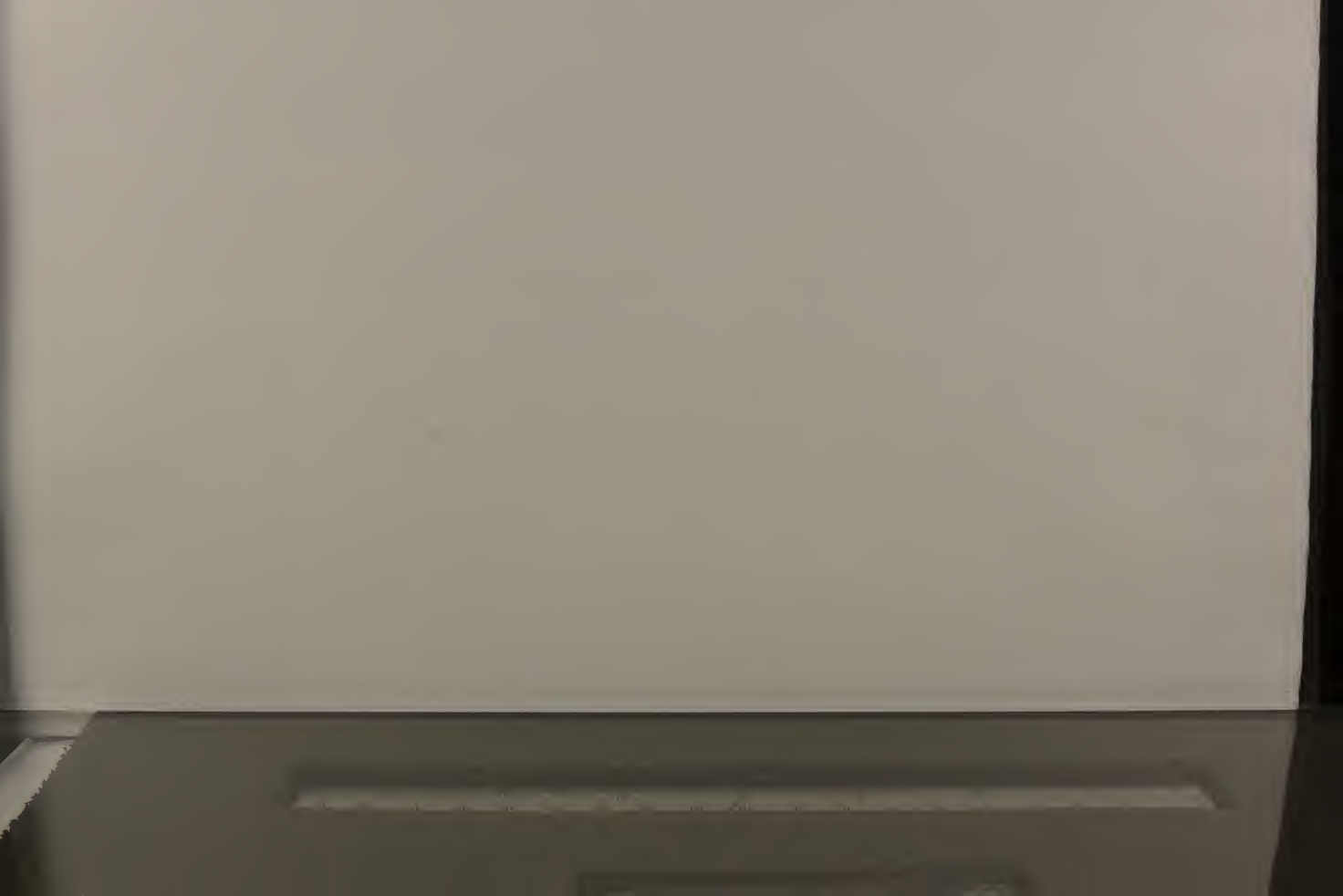

BOOK REVIEW

Rosslyn Chapel Revealed. Michael T.R.B.Turnbull. Sutton Publishing, 2007. xii+242pp. £17.99. ISBN 978 0 7509 4467 0

The feverish excitement surrounding the publication of Dan Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, with the subsequent film and DVD, brought Rosslyn Chapel a whole new fame. However, although the attention was a gift to the tourist industry, it saddened many by its distortion of the true identity of a much loved and admired medieval church. While diplomatically avoiding any direct criticism of those works of the imagination which brought 160,000 visitors to Rosslyn in 2006, Dr Turnbull sets out to redress the balance and restore the Chapel in the public mind to its true role as a place of Christian worship. In so doing, he set himself a difficult task, because of the scarcity of documentary evidence, a lack partly responsible for the weird legends which have grown up around the building.

In tackling the problem, the author decided against a chronological narrative and instead settled on a more thematic approach, with an emphasis on the environment in which the Chapel is set. His opening chapter, for instance, consists of a lengthy description of the landscape and geology of Midlothian, past and present, before we reach a short account of the Sinclairs of Rosslyn, leading on to the history of the building. This occupies one chapter only and for the medieval period draws heavily on the *Genealogie of the Sainteclaires of Rosslyn*, written in the late seventeenth century by Father Richard Augustine Hay and published by the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 2002. Unsurprisingly, no written records survive to tell us the names of the masons or describe the progress of their work, but the author compensates for this with lively discussions of the techniques of medieval masons in general and the organisation and music of Scottish collegiate churches.

The Chapel's foundations were laid in 1446 and construction seems to have gone on for the next forty years, but the intended tower and nave were never built, possibly because too much time and money had been spent on the elaborate carvings of both exterior and interior.

 ISSN 0264-5572

Rosslyn's official life as a collegiate church was relatively brief, from perhaps the early 1520s (the papal bull of erection has not survived) until the Reformation. After that the building fell into disuse although its intricate carvings made it a tourist attraction from then onwards and its nineteenth- and twentieth-century history centres on the still continuing conservation schemes which have preserved it.

So what occupies the other five chapters of the book? These form what might be termed a miscellany of information. "Visiting Rosslyn Chapel" gives a detailed description of the many carvings and would make a useful walk round guide, while "Varieties of Speculation" assesses past theories, ranging from the supposed resemblance between Rosslyn and the temple of Solomon to a useful discussion of the Prince's Pillar, formerly known as the Apprentice's Pillar. Stories about a jealous master mason killing his talented apprentice are related to it but are also told in connection with stained glass windows in other buildings, including Melrose Abbey and Rouen Cathedral, the author explains, pointing out that they may well derive from a mis-interpretation of carvings of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac.

Dr Turnbull is an accomplished writer with a pleasantly informative style and this is an attractive publication, lavishly illustrated in both black and white and in colour. It is in no way to detract from it to say that one can only admire the author's skill in putting together a full-length book about a building where the historical sources are so elusive, but the thematic arrangement does lead to repetition from time to time and the last two chapters in particular contain material which is decidedly peripheral. Despite the title, "Contemporary Attitudes" is little more than a directory of local organisations, while "Castles and Houses" would be useful to a visitor to the area but has little relevance for the main theme. That said, Dr Turnbull is to be congratulated on successfully reinstating Rosslyn Chapel in the public mind as the active Christian church that it is, coolly banishing those bizarre legends and conspiracy theories which may be entertaining but are not to be taken seriously.

Rosalind K. Marshall
Edinburgh

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